Ludic membership and orthopractic mobilization:

On slacktivism and all that

by

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This short research note is part of the *Durkheim and the Internet* project and attempts to theorize social phenomena emerging from the online-offline nexus. In what follows, I shall add to earlier steps in the project, specifically those related to "light" groups complementing, in socially relevant ways, the "thick" groups of an earlier Durkheimian-Parsonian sociological tradition (Blommaert 2017).

To recapitulate the earlier argument: in the online-offline nexus, we see a tremendous variety of new groups emerge, from social media networks (think of Facebook "friends") to more specific topically formed groups (e.g. fandom, brand-focused, lifestyle or foodie communities) (e.g. Maly 2017). In addition, we see how 'offline' communities get solidified by means of an extensive online infrastructure, the most crucial function of which appears to revolve around the distribution of knowledge and the organizing of elaborate (even if "light", i.e. not formalized nor institutionalized) learning practices (Maly & Varis 2015; Blommaert 2016). We observed that such "light" groups display "thick" characteristics: they can migrate offline and deploy powerful forms of activism there, in some instances bordering on what can be called "revolutionary" action (e.g. Costea 2017).

There is a literature that tends to be dismissive of such online-offline forms of activism, calling it, alternately, "clicktivism" or "slacktivism" and distinguishing it clearly from "real" sociopolitical mobilization and activism (e.g. Morozov 2011). I do not intend to frontally attack such dismissive statements; what I wish to do, though, is to offer suggestions for a more nuanced and accurate understanding of such forms of social practice – an attempt at *reimagining* "slacktivism" if you wish, by pointing to some of its crucial features and providing a theoretical vocabulary to describe and generalize them.

I believe there are two issues that demand attention here. One is the issue of *group membership*, the other of *group mobilization*. Both issues have been critical topics of social and political-theoretical debate throughout the twentieth century. In fact, they are key issues

in revolutionary theory from Lenin to Gramsci, in democratic theory from Dewey to Habermas, as well as in cultural studies. I cannot go into these historical debates here and shall reserve them for future discussion. In what follows, I must confine myself to sketching the skeleton of a larger theoretical structure on what presently might constitute, in important ways, the morphology of "the public" or "the masses" as a sociologically relevant (and agentive) force.

Ludic forms of attachment

What do we know so far? We know that the online-offline nexus has resulted in the mushrooming of technologically mediated social groups of bewildering diversity and without precedent, best imagined (following Castells' 1996 early characterization) as "networks" and enabling a vast array of new forms of identity performance and experience (boyd 2011). Identity work has acquired an outspoken level of fragmentation and mobility, something that can be imagined as "chronotopic", in which different resources and normative behavior templates ("microhegemonies") need to be deployed in specific TimeSpace configurations. The elaborate identity repertoires needed for adequate levels of integration in this ever-expanding field of identity work requires permanent learning and re-learning work, and most online environments can be empirically described as "communities of knowledge": chronotopes in which specific identity resources can be formed, learned and policed.

We also know that such communities – even if they operate as real communities, including forms of leadership, normative behavioral scripts and levels of integration – are open, undemanding and flexible when it comes to membership, and that older conceptions of what it means to be a member impede a precise understanding of the actual forms of attachment developing between individuals and groups.

In his classic *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga emphasized what he saw as an important counterpoint to Weber's rationalization drive in Modernity: the playful character of many social, cultural and political practices. In our tendency to organize societies along rational management patterns, Huizinga insisted, we risked losing sight of the fact that much of what people do is governed by an *ir*rational logic, a ludic pattern of action. Even more, much of what we see as the rational organization of societies is grounded, in fact, in play (Huizinga 2014: 5).

Huizinga (2014, chapter 1) lists several features of "play". I shall select a number of them.

(i)   Play is *significant*: it is a site of meaning-making in which "something is at play";

(ii)   it is, at the same time a *voluntary* activity often experienced as a site of personal freedom;

(iii)   it is relatively *unregulated* and unconstrained by established rules and forms of control (distinguishing "play" from a "game" such as chess or poker);

(iv)   it is an *authentic* activity in which we observe the unconstrained "playing out" of the self; it outside the range of what is commonly seen as "useful" or "effective" (it is done "just for fun");

(v)   it is *enclosed* in the sense that it often requires a particular spatiotemporal organization different from that of other activities; and finally,

(vi)   given all the previous characteristics, it is also a *serious* activity demanding focus, intensity and skill, and it has an inevitable aspect of *learning* to it.

Two remarks are in order. One, with respect to the characteristic of authenticity (iv above), it must be underscored that it is perfectly normal to *play someone else while expressing some essential "self"*. In fact, forms of play in which roles are assumed by players, masks or other garments are worn or names are being changed for the duration of the event are found everywhere. In the online world it suffices to think of highly developed communities such as those of cosplay and gaming to see the point; but think also of the widespread use of aliases or nicknames on social media platforms. Just as we can distinguish a Foucaultian "care of the self" in various forms of play, we see a "care of the selfie" in online play as well.

Two, with respect to (v) above – Huizinga's requirement of spatiotemporal "isolation" for play – we can emphasize the chronotopic nature of ludic practices. Play is often reserved for, and reliant upon, restricted and elaborately organized TimeSpace configurations. Think of a "play room" or a "play corner", of "holiday" and "leisure" as segmented TimeSpace configurations reserved for ludic activities, but also of current expressions such as "quality time" or "me time" (a segment of time spent on ludic, non-work activities). Observe, by the way, the strong *moral* ring of such terms: they refer to things we absolutely need and value highly; denial of such things is often perceived as unacceptable. In online activities, the TimeSpace configuration is present as well, and relatively undemanding in addition: we need an individual and an online device, and little more is required. Which is why "spending time behind your computer" is often perceived as "asocial" or "individualistic": we perceive an individual *alone* with his/her device, who is deeply involved, of course, with *a community* not sharing the physical TimeSpace but very much present and active in the "virtual" one.

If we now take Huizinga's characteristics and apply them to the "light" forms of membership in online communities, we see a potential for application – perhaps not to *all* forms of online membership but to *many* of them. We can see how attachment to online groups is not (in a great many instances) conditioned by permanent, heavily ordered, policed and "total" involvement – one does not *have* to become an expert in, say, advanced Barbecue techniques just by visiting Barbecue-focused websites or fora, and one does not have to participate in *all* events on a cosplay forum in order to be a "member". One can also enter and participate on such online platforms without subscribing to the full range of norms, expectations and cultural premises prevailing there, and one can articulate one's participation in terms of very different intentions and desired outcomes than the next person. An online gaming forum is not a school, even if we find organized and tightly observed learning practices on the online gaming forum too. It turns the gaming forum into a ludic learning environment in which different forms of knowledge practice are invited, allowed and ratified. Such practices – precisely – are "light" ones too – think of "phatic" expressions of attachments such as the retweet on Twitter and the "likes" on Facebook: knowledge practices not necessarily experienced as such, and rather more frequently seen as "just for fun".

Note Huizinga's final characteristic: ludic practice is *serious* practice. The relatively "light", mobile and flexible features of online communities do not prevent intense and profoundly focused forms of attachment. The experience of freedom and authenticity, and the absence of obvious "normal" forms of usefulness and efficiency might, on the contrary, precisely contribute to the sometimes phenomenal investments made by members in their attachments to such groups. There is a degree of intimacy evolving from ludic practices (including the "phatic" ones just mentioned): people make friends while playing, because play enables them to show their "authentic" self.[1] This brings us to the next point.

Orthopractic mobilization

With the image of ludic membership, we may have somewhat softened the attribute of "slacktivism" attached to forms of online mobilization. We are not seeing "traditional" groups in action here, but a ludic form of group attachment in which intentions, functions and outcomes may differ greatly, in spite of joined (and strongly experienced) focus of attention and intense learning. It is the nature of such forms of membership that excludes, I believe,

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[1] This explains the very widespread genre of "confession" on social media. Confession, as Foucault (2003) observed, is a *veridictional* genre, a genre of truth-speaking in which an uninhibited self communicates fundamental truths to other uninhibited selves.

traditional notions of "hegemony" as the engine driving individuals to mass action. Such forms of hegemony presuppose levels of organization, leadership, and ultimately of rationality in planning and approach, none of which can be expected in ludic online communities of knowledge.

Yet, considering these moments where online activity went hand in hand with mass offline action (think of the Romanian "revolution" documented by Costea (2017), or of the millions of people taking to the streets in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, carrying "je Suis Charlie" banners and badges), mass mobilization is not just possible, but possible on a rarely observed scale as well. Hashtag activism is not the Holy Grail of new politics, but it is not an impotent thing either.

In order to grasp its potency, we need to introduce two elements. One: *structures of feeling*. Rather than the full-blown ideologies, fully understood and shared by the masses in the Gramscian tradition, online-offline mass mobilization might rely on what Raymond Williams (1977) called "structures of feeling": inchoate mass-shared understandings of a moral/aesthetic kind translated into political reactions. Online resources offer an incredible potential for the ultra-fast sharing of sentiments, instant reactions to events, images and symbols. Those reactions can suffice to bring people out in the street, certainly when they can be generalized to broad *passe partout* feelings of fear, injustice or fairness.

If we accept this first element, a second one is straightforward. I suggest that we see such forms of online-offline mass mobilization as moments of *"orthopractic" mobilization*. The term "orthopraxy" is here borrowed from James C. Scott (1990), and refers to a display of ideological agreement not necessarily accompanied by full ideological endorsement. By absence of a full-blown ideology in online mobilization, what appears to be shared is a "common sense" – a common reaction to events easily formatted into mass-shared templates of expression: the use of banners, symbols and slogans often backed up by hashtags ("Je Suis Charlie"), mass marches and rallies, silent wakes, flowers and candlelight displays, and so forth.

The formatted character of such moments of mass action makes them "orthopractic": people perform the restricted sets of rituals articulating structures of feeling, the codes and templates of which are often produced and distributed online. It thus becomes a mass form of "quality time" – an enclosed moment of shared authenticity, recognizable play and moral valuations to which one attends intensely and with great doses of sincerity. And while the online actions

usually largely survive the offline ones, the moments of offline mobilization are impressive as well as politically significant, the more since such moments of mobilization often have a grassroots, "from below", spontaneous and therefore unexpected nature. The mass mobilization across the EU in the summer of 2015 in favor of a more generous approach towards refugees, for instance, caught the governments by surprise and led, in some instances, to a lasting and well organized transnational solidarity movement.

Reimagination once more

The online-offline nexus produces new forms of social relationships and practices, new forms of cultural performance, and new political formats of action as well. More traditional modes of political organization – political parties, trade unions and so forth – still exist, but their capacity for mass mobilization (based on fixed and permanent membership, full subscription to a program, recognition of leadership structures etc.) is a permanent source of concern for them, while it is still considered to be a major factor of political legitimacy (and thence, of power). Such traditional modes stand, thus, in an uneasy relationship with the new forms of mobilization discussed here. The masses still take to the street, and do so in huge numbers, but not necessarily as a response to the call from parties or unions.

In describing these different forms of group attachment and mobilization I had to draw on two terms carrying, in common parlance, rather negative connotations. The "ludic" is often seen *in opposition to* the "serious" business of sociopolitical organization and governance. And "orthopraxy" is often seen as a fake form of ideological alignment, a "pretending to" and "doing as if" one subscribes to a political program or ideology. The same goes for the term "light" in expressions such as "light groups": it stands in opposition to, and is seen as inferior to, "thick" groups such as those defined by nationality, race, gender, class, religion or age.

It is difficult, for the moment, to change the terms. But it is possible to change their indexical vector from negative to, at least, neutral – descriptive. And to simply take the phenomena they cover seriously and responsibly, as social facts demanding analytical attention and comprehension. It is the task of perpetual reimagination of a reality which, damn it or bless it, refuses to sit still.

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